

A Synthesis of Lyrical Excellence & Martial Agility – The Stage Art of Ng Kwan Lai

Learning From Great Masters

Born Ng Wan, a native of Zhongshan in the province of Guangdong, Ng Kwan Lai grew up in Shanghai, and it was while she was being educated there that she became fascinated by traditional dramatic performances. Arriving in Hong Kong with her family in 1952, she enrolled at the Hong Kong Academy of Cantonese Opera the following year to study under the renowned performer Chan Fei Nung. A hard-working student who realized that the martial arts and acrobatic performances of Beijing Opera held a greater appeal, she went on to learn stage martial arts under the father-and-son team of Kay Choi Fun and Kay Yuk Kun, the well-known Beijing Opera masters. Her concentrated efforts quickly bore fruit as her performances gained in skill and credibility. To improve her vocal presentation, she turned to Cantonese Opera singing coaches Wan Chi Chung and Lam Siu Lau and then took lessons in ancient melodies from Lui Man Shing. The tutelage of these famous musicians introduced her to the art of singing, and her voice began to take on a memorable brilliance and resonance. Guided by these great masters, Ng received balanced training in stylistic and vocal performance, and this paved the way for her success in the roles of the *dou ma dan* (the female martial role), the *tsing yi* (the gentle young woman who suffers a distressing fate and ends up destitute) and the *kwei mun dan* (the girl from an affluent and respectable family).

Ng made her stage debut in 1954 when Chan Fei Nung invited her to make a guest appearance in the production by his Yat Chi Mui Opera Troupe of the opera *War and Love*. In her next stage appearance – as the patriotic and supportive royal consort to the crown prince of the Yan State in the opera *Jing Ke, the Hero* – her interpretation of the secondary female role, and especially her performance in the scene *The Farewell at the River Yi*, not only impressed audiences but also garnered her good reviews. It was the beginning of a glittering stage career.



Master Kay Yuk Kun teaching martial arts of Beijing Opera to Ng Kwan Lai
1950s
2003.31.775



Accompanied by Master Chan Fei Nung, Ng Kwan Lai making her debut at Yat Chi Mui Opera Troupe in *Fairies Spreading Flowers*.

1954
2003.31.2738

The Eye-Catching Heroine — Ng's Performances as the *Dou Ma Dan*

Learning the martial arts of Beijing Opera from Kay Choi Fun and Kay Yuk Kun, Ng had to undergo daily training in the basic gestures and movements to be performed on stage. These included leg stretches – also with hips bent –, kicks, circular strides, splits, hip spins, falling movements, a variety of battle stances, walking elegantly with bound feet as well as riding gestures. Drills like this had to be practised every day if a presentable professional standard was to be maintained.

In 1955, Ng formed her own opera troupe, the Lai Sing Opera Troupe, and immediately made a name for herself in the premiere of *How Leung Hung Yuk's War Drum Caused the Jin Army to Retreat*. Starring in the leading role of Leung Hung Yuk opposite Mak Bing Wing, she dazzled the audience with her martial arts – alternate swift spear and double sword play, pre-battle and battle stances, banner waves and army inspections as well as the sword dance of Concubine Yu. The troupe put on a total of sixteen performances at both the Ko Sing Theatre and Prince Theatre, all to full houses and rave reviews. It was this production that established Ng's reputation for playing the principal female role.

It was through her presentation of the *dou ma dan* roles that Ng impressed audiences in her early career, but in her later performances she gained renown for her martial roles, in particular in *Presenting a Sword at Hundred-Flowers Pavilion* with the Lai Sing Opera Troupe, *The Story of Chu Pin's Loyalty to Sung Dynasty* with the Chung San Sing Opera Troupe and the San Lai Sing Cantonese Opera Troupe's *A Tragic Story in Palace*.



Postbill of the 1st Performance of Lai Sing Opera Troupe

Repertoire: *How Leung Hung Yuk's War Drum Caused the Jin Army to Retreat* and *A Filial Daughter Fighting for Her Innocent Mother*

Written by So Yung and Suen Siu Ming

Performances on 28 May 1956

2000.4.47



A scene from the opera *How Leung Hung Yuk's War Drum Caused the Jin Army to Retreat*

1956

2003.31.1620

The Eye-Catching Heroine — The Costumes of a *Dou Ma Dan*

The major stage apparel of a *dou ma dan* includes grand armour, light armour, the costume of a cartress, the python ceremonial robe and the archer's suit. Together with the appropriate accessories such as helmets and boots, these costumes portray the image of a dashing heroine.

The principle costume for any martial role is armour. Grand armour features banners on the back and a middle section slightly broadened at the front (known as the “belly” of the armour). Light armour is similar to grand armour in form, but has no “belly” and no banners on the back. When playing the role of the cartress, for example in *The Joint Investiture of a Prime Minister by Six Kingdoms*, the principal female wears a costume that looks similar to light armour, but the banners representing the cart have to match the travelling costume. In addition, the actress's headgear has to be adorned with a fishermaid's hat.

The costume that characterizes the roles of empress, royal concubine, princess and duchess is the python ceremonial robe, which can be worn by both civil and military characters. Additionally adorned with headgear such as the headdress of a female general, the costume reinforces the image of a strong, heroic female warrior.

The archer's suit is basically made up of the costume for martial arts. It is slit from the waist down at the centre of the outer garment, so that it does not impede the artist as she performs her acrobatics. A T-shaped sash is also attached round the waist.

Other *dou ma dan* costumes include a fighting costume, a hunting costume and the Thirteenth Sister costume that is based on a character in a traditional martial arts novel.



Sequined Grand Armour for Female General

1964

2003.31.204



Ng Kwan Lai wearing the grand armour when performing *How Leung Hung Yuk's War Drum Caused the Jin Army to Retreat* in Singapore.

1964

2003.31.2528

Gentle and Elegant — Ng in the *Tsing Yi* and *Kwei Mun Dan* roles

Ng impressed her audiences with her martial arts performance in *How Leung Hung Yuk's War Drum Caused the Jin Army to Retreat*, but these roles tend to drain the energy and damage the voice, something that subsequently affects an artist's vocal performance. Ng was aware of the old saying "lyrical rather than martial" among Cantonese Opera actors, which dispenses the wisdom that there is greater scope for development in the lyrical parts.

So although Ng had immersed herself completely – and successfully – in the performance of martial roles, the renowned Cantonese Opera playwright Tong Tik Sang pointed out that this was going to exhaust her. Ng had a good voice and was perfectly equipped to sing in *ji hou* (female falsetto singing in Cantonese Opera), and Tong therefore advised her to devote herself to lyrical parts, as this would bring out the best in her singing. Subsequently, Tong wrote the opera *A Beauty's Grave* especially for Ng. Playing the tragic heroine Lam Yu Heung, she moved her audience to tears. From that point on, Ng changed direction, devoting herself to performing the *tsing yi* and *kwei mun dan* rather than the *dou ma dan* roles. Tong continued to write gentle, elegant roles for her, which included tragic heroines such as Shiu Jing Neung in *The Fragrant Sachet* and Lee Sam Neung in *Madam Lee Sam Neung*. Both operas proved to be among Ng's most successful.

From the early *dou ma dan* roles to the upright, tragic *tsing yi* roles and noble ladies typical of the *kwei mun dan* role, Ng won the acclaim of her audience and established herself as a versatile Cantonese Opera artist.



Clay Print Libretto of *A Beauty's Grave*

Lai Sing Opera Troupe

Written by Tong Tik Sang

Premiere on 4 November 1956

2003.31.3012



A Scene from the Opera *Madam Lee Sam Neung*

1958

2003.31.2435

Gentle and Elegant — The Costumes of *Tsing Yi* and *Kwei Mun Dan*

The principle costume items for the *tsing yi* and *kwei mun dan* roles include the minor ancient costume, the robe with a vertical collar, the ceremonial cape and the python ceremonial robe. *Tsing yi* costumes are distinguished by plainer and darker colours with simpler hair ornaments, while *kwei mun dan* costumes are more colourful with glittery hair ornaments. Phoenix coronets are also worn on some occasions.

The minor ancient costume comprises an upper garment with short, wide sleeves, to which are attached flowing, white "water sleeves", worn over a long skirt girdled with sashes. This is mainly the costume for young, unmarried ladies.

The robe with a vertical collar is the customary costume for the roles of married, gentle women. A wide-sleeved robe with a symmetrically split collar, it is worn as casual wear by noblewomen and officials.

The ceremonial cape is the formal wear for noble ladies; it can also serve as a wedding dress. It is worn with a shawl collar over long vests and long skirts.

The python ceremonial robe is the costume for empresses, royal consorts, princesses and duchesses. In gentle scenes, it is often worn with a phoenix coronet or with the hair done up in a chignon to highlight the noble rank of the character.



Red Sequined Costume for Lady

1960s

2003.31.109



Ng Kwan Lai wearing the red sequined costume when playing the role of Wong Sui Lan in *Two Immortals at the Pavilion of the Moon*

1961

2003.31.1512

A Star among Stars

Ng's success on the opera stage owed much to her own efforts, but she was also well served by good scripts and her collaboration with outstanding principal male performers.

After Tong Tik Sang changed the course of Ng's career with the production of *A Beauty's Grave* in 1956, Ng expanded her Lai Sing Opera Troupe into a much larger company, attracting performers such as Mak Bing Wing, Ho Fei Fan, Chan Kam Tong, Boon Yat On, Leung Seng Po, Lang Chi Pak, Fung Wong Nui and Lam Kar Sing to the cast of principals. Tong Tik Sang wrote scripts and librettos for this troupe, composing eleven operas for Ng from 1956 to 1959, including *The Fragrant Sachet*, *The Double Pearl Hair-pins*, *An Amorous Encounter*, *Two Immortals at the Pavilion of the Moon*, *The Jealous Wife*, *Madam Lee Sam Neung*, *Presenting a Sword at Hundred-Flowers Pavilion*, *Missing the Fragrance of Plum-Blossom in Snow* and *Bloody Silk Robe*. All of these are regarded as some of his most successful operas, and they are still performed by various opera troupes today.

In 1960, Ng appeared with San Ma Sze Tsang in *Tragic Yearnings for the Return of the Betrothed*, *A Royal Wedding* and *Bitter Revenge*. She sang alongside Ho Fei Fan in Fei Fan Heung Opera Troupe's production of *Dream of the Golden Well in Red Chamber*, composed by the playwright Yip Shiu-tuck. Ng's vivacious portrayal of the character Kam Chuen was well matched by Ho's performance as Bo Yuk, and their singing was considered legendary at the time. Ng and Ho performed the same opera in 1969, when Ho's Fei Fan Heung Opera Troupe toured Chinese communities in North America. Presenting a total of 62 performances, the tour broke all North American records for Cantonese Opera.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Ng performed with Lam Kar Sing in his Chung San Sing Opera Troupe, with Yip Shiu-tuck writing *The Story of Chu Pin's Loyalty to Sung Dynasty* especially for them. Ng took the part of the Princess of Liao, which is a gentle role with a touch of the martial, allowing her once again to showcase her martial arts and acrobatic agility. During the same period, the renowned playwright Li Siu Wan composed a number of new operas for the Chung San Sing Opera Troupe, including some of his best known works such as *Clever Lin Xiang Yu Saving the*

Kingdom Zhao, Bo Yuk and Doi Yuk at the Red Chamber, and Adventures in a Snow Storm.

Performing the best scripts in collaboration with the outstanding artists of the time, Ng achieved even more dazzling success.



Led by the playwright Tong Tik Sang (centre), Ng Kwan Lai, Ho Fei Fan and others reading through the libretto

1950s

2003.31.844



A Scene from the Opera *Two Immortals at the Pavilion of the Moon*

Ho Fei Fan and Ng Kwan Lai

1958

2003.31.1470

Song of the Nightingale

It has often been said that voice, appearance and stage craft are of equal importance to an opera singer. Of these qualities, the voice is considered most crucial, as appearance can be remedied by make-up and costumes, and the art of performance can be cultivated. If a singer is blessed with a good voice, future success is almost guaranteed.

There is never any doubt that Ng has a good voice: her singing always has the mellow, melodic quality of the most perfect *ji hou*. Her own efforts contributed much to her success, while the tutelage of such musicians as Wan Chi Chung, Lam Shiu Lau and Lui Man Shing all left their mark: Ng's singing brings together Wan's elegance, Lam's decisiveness and Lui's melancholy, rising and falling with the emotions of the characters portrayed and moving the sensibilities of her audience.

Ng featured in many well known operas, but she made few recordings of her singing. However, *Madam Lee Sam Neung* and *Presenting a Sword at Hundred-Flowers Pavilion* were made into films, and the soundtracks are still available. Ng also recorded *Dream of the Golden Well in Red Chamber* with Ho Fei Fan, which has fortunately survived to serve as a witness to her vocal performance and offer a rare treat for Cantonese Opera aficionados.



Record — *Meeting Plum-fairy in My Dream*

Sung by Ng Kwan Lai and Yam Kim Fai

Produced by Fung Hang Record Ltd.

1967

2003.31.3460



Record — Original Soundtrack of the Movie *Who should be the Commander-in-chief?*

Sung by Ng Kwan Lai, Lam Kar Sing, Kwan Hoi Shan and Lee Heung Kum

Produced by Fung Hang Record Ltd.

1967

1998.78.12

Ng the Film Star

Ng made her first film in 1955, starring alongside Yam Kim Fai and Pak Suet Sin in *The Model and the Girl*. This was the same year that she appeared on stage with San Ma Sze Tsang in *Bitter Revenge*, in which she dazzled in the role of the Queen of Yue, who remained a staunch supporter of her imprisoned husband despite suffering the same fate.

Between 1955 and 1967, Ng appeared in over 150 operatic and modern-dress films, mostly alongside male leads such as Yam Kim Fai, San Ma Sze Tsang, Law Kim Long, Cheung Ying Choi and Wu Fung. Of these films, *How Leung Hung Yuk's War Drum Caused the Jin Army to Retreat*, *A Beauty's Grave*, *Two Immortals at the Pavilion of the Moon*, *Madam Lee Sam Neung*, *Uproar in Jade Hall*, *Lust is the Worst Vice*, and *Who Should be the Commander-in-chief* were originally successful stage productions that were adapted for the silver screen. In 1960, her film *The Unroyal Prince* was one of that year's top box office hits.

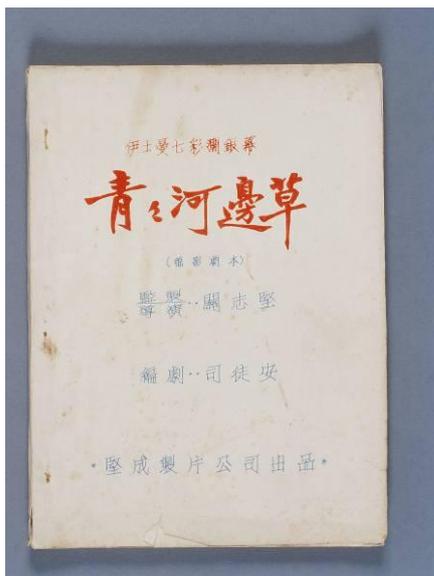
Ng also starred in quite a large number of modern-dress films, including *Whatever You Say*, *My Darling Wife*, *The Rebellion*, *The Big Revenge* and *The Bridge*. *River of Mandarin Duck*, made in 1960, broke box office records in Singapore. In 1962, Ng founded the San Lai Sing Film Company to make her own productions, the best known of which was *The Widow*, adapted from a radio play broadcast on Commercial Radio about the misfortunes of a young girl. In 1964, she appeared on stage in Singapore and Malaysia to promote the premiere of her film *The Factory Rose*, when she sang her most famous arias and performed numbers such as the Double Sword Dance and the Fan Dance as well as instrumental solos on the Chinese zither and *zheng* – to the great delight of the audience. During the 1960s, Ng was awarded the Wah Kiu Man Po Golden Globe Award several times as one of the top ten Mandarin and Cantonese film stars – adding further glory to her already impressive record.



Special Film Issue—*It's Sweet to Die for One's Love*

1963

2003.31.2943



Film Libretto of *The Rebellion*

1966

2003.31.3091

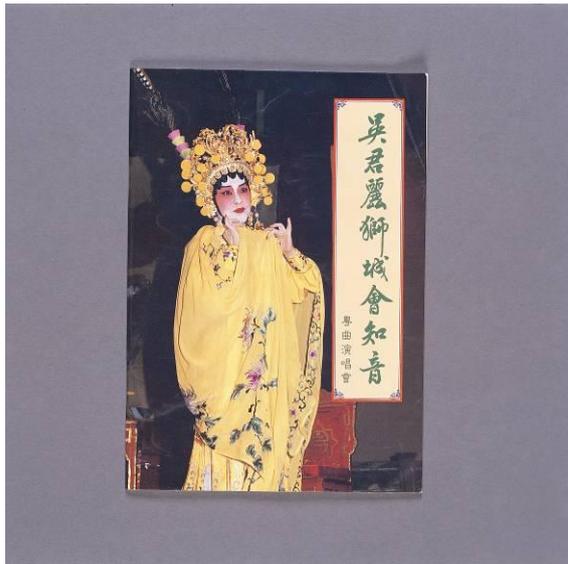
Curtain Calls

From 1987 to 1989, Ng performed with the San Lai Sing Cantonese Opera Troupe, which she had founded with Chan Kim Sing and Sun Hoi Chuen.

It was around this time that she also performed a new opera, *A Tragic Story in the Palace*, written by Chan Koon Hing of Guangzhou. She then took part in *A Retrospective of the Works of Tong Tik Sang* at the invitation of the former Urban Council. This was to be her final performance on the professional stage.

During the 1980s, she continued to perform with the San Lai Sing Cantonese Opera Troupe, while also taking part in charity shows such as the 1986 Po Leung Kuk Centenary Charity Show with other Cantonese Opera artists from Hong Kong and Guangzhou. In 1990, she went to Britain to perform in a charity show organised by the Buddhist and Taoist International Association (UK) Ltd. She remains a dedicated volunteer for the older generation, visiting homes for the aged and singing at recitals organised for the elderly.

After her move to Singapore in the 1990s, she continued to devote much of her time to promoting the art of Cantonese Opera, acting as consultant to organisations such as the Chinese Opera Society Singapore, the Chinese Theatre Circle and the Gangzhou Society. Her 1991 recital, *Ng Kwan Lai's Rendezvous with Her Singapore Fans* in Singapore, marked her retirement from the stage.



Programme — “Ng Kwan Lai’s Rendezvous with Her Singapore Fans” Concert
September 1991
2003.31.2855

Donation

When Ng Kwan Lai paid a visit to the Hong Kong Heritage Museum in 2002, she was so impressed by the work to preserve the relics and legacies of Cantonese Opera that she agreed to donate to the museum over 3,000 items from her own collection of costumes, trunks, stage props, librettos, publicity publications and photographs. Of all the donations the museum has received from performers, Ng's collection is the largest and as well as the most varied. The donation represents a valuable addition to the museum's collections and a significant resource for studying the life and career of Ng Kwan Lai as well as the development of Cantonese Opera and the film industry in Hong Kong.



Ng Kwan Lai standing in front of her donated costumes.
2004